LOOKING FOR LIFE

February 7, 1988, 11:00 a.m. Worship Service

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Scripture
Mark 1:29-39

..."and they found him and said to him, 'Every one is searching for you.'"
Mark 1:37(RSV)

What are you doing here this morning? You are not really supposed to be here. After all, it's cold out and you could be in an easy chair, still in your robe, reading the paper, having a second cup of coffee. And if you thought you really needed a little religion, there would be a wide range of choices as close as the channel buttons on the remote device: hot Gospel, Crystal Cathedral, a Roman Mass, and in the middle of it all Linda Loving being interviewed this morning by Lydia Talbot on a program with the curious name "Every Man." You would have enjoyed the added wonder of a volume control and mute button to turn off the sound when you wish, which you certainly don't have here. What are we doing here? By coming here this morning you are, in fact, contradicting the best judgment of our wisest, most astute prognosticators. You are not supposed to be here.

In his new history of Modern American Religion, Martin Marty observes that things religious often do not turn out the way they are supposed to. Marty writes:

> "Those who observe modern American religion have reasons to be surpris over the amount of the substance they encounter. For centuries, plausible prophets have envisioned the decline of religion. Scenarios written in Europe and sometimes in America pictured an urban and industrial life inimical to faith."

But religion didn't disappear - it prospered... Instead of dissolving as it was supposed to, it relocated.

Marty observes in the first chapter of Vol. I, The Irony Of It All, that instead of becoming less religious - we keep inventing "new ways to pursue (our) spiritual questions." [Modern American Religion, Vol. I, "The Irony Of It All," p. 2]

Like Mark Twain's obituary, which we read in the newspaper, the announcement of the end of religion is obviously premature. However, the

predictions of the demise of religion, and the emergence of a new self-sufficient, mature, secular humankind were made with astonishing confidence just a decade or two ago. It was the general opinion among those who matter intellectually, that the church was irrelevant, the church's morality utterly obsolete, the church's world view actually repressive. Besides, some theologians announced, God is dead. It even made the cover of Time. Seriously misunderstanding Bonhoeffer, it was proposed that since the human race has "come of age" the very best thing we can do is discard religion and become fully human, standing on our own, leaning on no one - certainly not the obsolete mythologies of the past.

The Marxists, of course, always knew that it was only a matter of time. For more than a century they have known that religion is an opiate whose purpose is to anesthetize oppressed people to the injustices around them. When eyes are opened to that unsavory relationship between religion and the oppressors, religion will die out quite naturally, particularly among the oppressed working class. Ironically, even in the most rigidly Marxist states, religion not only hasn't disappeared but keeps emerging... in China - Russia... In Poland more new churches are under construction than at any time in Polish history.

But then, from the opposite pole politically, in mid-century, a materialism of the right joined the chorus. The meaning of our humanity would be here realized in consumerism, earning, buying, accumulating - consuming... "The One With The Most Toys Wins" announces the BMW bumper sticker.

So with the two major cultural forces of the age aligned squarely against us, socialist materialism and capitalist materialism, and with our best minds predicting our demise - we probably shouldn't be here this morning. The irony of it all...

Why have we come here this morning? My proposal is that there is an affinity between those of us who have decided to be here this morning, and those people who gathered outside the home of Simon Peter at sundown on the Sabbath day nearly two thousand years ago. It is one of the loveliest images in the New Testament. The incident takes place at Capernaum, in Galilee - the place which would become home for Jesus of Nazareth for the next three years. It happens early - at the beginning of the story...

The house belongs to Simon Peter, a local fisherman. Earlier on that quiet Sabbath day there had been a disturbance in the Synagogue. Jesus was teaching and he was interrupted by a strange, wild man who, it was said, was possessed. Everyone avoided the man. He was different, peculiar, frightening. But somehow, in the midst of his teaching, Jesus of Nazareth had freed the man from the mental torment with which he had lived all his life... And so, with the sun setting, in that glorious hour of early evening, people started to gather at the house where he was staying. They came bringing their sick mothers and fathers, the children who were born crippled... They came alone too, bringing the pain in their own hearts: the outcast, the lonely, the blind, the different, the morally and socially alienated. He touched each one of them and in his touch they were made whole.

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Then the next morning he rose early to go for a walk, beside the sea, I like to think. But more people had come to the house and so Peter had to find him... "everyone is searching for you," Peter said.

Notice the internal dynamic. Jesus confronts and heals. That precipitates awe. But more than simple religious curiosity, it stimulates hope - in the hearts of a lot of people - who had long ago given up hope for newness and vitality and wholeness. Suddenly they found a reason to hope and so they get up out of bed, or out of the chair they sit in day in and day out; they emerge from the walled-in prison of whatever it is that cripples and oppresses, and head for Simon Peter's house. Now everyone is looking for him. You bet they are. Here is a man who touches the untouchables, who confronts the demons which torment, who makes the crippled walk and the blind see, and the guilt-ridden breath deeply, and the self-loathing smile at the visage of themselves once again. Looking for life - they came searching for Jesus. My proposal is that there is an affinity between them and us; that once again, Scripture is a mirror in which we see ourselves.

Those people were looking for life and so are we.

We are here because we have learned a secret. In spite of the materialism of left and right - we have discovered that after our material physical needs are met, after we have the new suits we need, the proper address, the right car, after we have traveled, been entertained and eaten in the best restaurants - we have discovered a hunger that is not satisfied.

We are here because what makes us human is something beyond that. We have discovered that the fullness of our humanity is not defined by materialism of left or right but by a list of questions we can never stop asking...

Who am I?
What does my life mean?
Where am I going?

Paul Tournier, Swiss physician, theologian and author tells a story about the time he was summoned by a knock on his door late in the evening. There stood a United Nations diplomat, in tuxedo... having left in the middle of one of the endless diplomatic cocktail parties. "Dr. Tournier," he said, "I am looking for life. I am not living a real life at all." [Paul Tournier, The Meaning of Persons, p. 28-29]

What are we doing here? Why, we're looking for life, that's what. That's presumptuous of me, of course. If a television camera were shoved in our faces and we were asked why we came we'd probably say - to hear a sermon, to listen to great music, to get away from it all, to be with friends... or because I have no where better to be. Those would, of course, all be true answers. But I presume to suggest that beneath all those answers, what we are really doing here is looking for life... And the life we are looking for is pretty well defined by those questions, the asking of which makes us human -

Who am I?
What does my life mean?
Where am I going?
Who am I?

One of our eccentricities is that when we come here we dress up elaborately. The reason is that the occasion is important - but also because we know our vulnerability and our nakedness. Near the very powerful conclusion of King Lear, Lear encounters Edgar, already half-naked and Lear starts to strip off his rags - and he says, -

"Unaccommodated man is no more
but such a poor, bare, forked animal..."

That speaks for all of us... We are here because we need to know that we matter. When we are naked, stripped of all we have, there is something more to us... We need to know that our living matters. [See Frederick Buechner, Telling The Truth, p. 33]

And although many of us would have a very difficult time admitting it, because we are so concerned of our autonomy and independence, we are here because part of the sense human life makes happens when human life is part of a community, part of something bigger than our solitary lives.

How important is that? I think it is impossible to describe how important it is. The people who have studied the sudden emergence of religious cults conclude that the fundamental appeal is that they provide a sense of belonging... Psychologists tell us it is among our more urgent needs.

Parents in California are asking their schools why their young children are so intent on wearing Spuds MacKenzie T-shirts. Spuds is the Budweiser mascot - whose appeal is enormous - especially to an age group which is closer to drinking out of baby bottles than the legal age for drinking out of beer bottles. A psychologist answered - because that T-shirt says "I belong to my peers." [See Christian Century, Jan. 20, 1988]

The individuals who gathered outside Peter's door not only found Jesus, they found one another. Everywhere he went, he created community. And the earliest and best miracle he performed had to do with people discovering that God's love for them as individuals must be expressed in their love for one another. It's the most overlooked part of the story...

So we are here because part of what we are looking for is a community whose ongoing life gives meaning to our lives, whose purposes are larger and good and noble and which call out of us good and noble aspirations.

And we are here because each of us - like those who gathered at sundown at the home of Simon Peter - is looking for hope. We are looking for a sense - that even if I don't have all the answers, even if I don't know what will become of me and those I love, even if I fear death and shudder at the thought of my own demise - there is one in whose hands I can place the whole matter. One whose love is eternal, who will be there at the end of the days. One whose love transcends death. One whose strong love is

far more important than a simple answer to the question about what happens when I die.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ, in all its simplicity and complexity, announces that God has spoken a word on the topics of human meaning and community and destiny.

Jesus Christ is God's answer to the questions which make us human...

He is God's Word that we matter -
to God - our Creator.

He is God creating a community which
will be our home.

He is God's love - promising our safety
and ultimate security.

Looking for life... is what we are doing here. And the miracle is that while we look, he finds us and touches us. And the miracle of wholeness begins to happen and we discover, sometimes in the midst of tears and sometimes in the midst of great laughter, that it is Jesus Christ we have been looking for all along...

O Lord, we come to your table this morning because you have invited us... We come to this table, covered with white linen, to eat and drink together because we are looking for life...

O God, as we search, find us... As we ask about our identity, our significance, our destiny, come once again as, in Christ, you touched the lives of those who were searching long ago...

And, in the breaking of bread, call out of each of us new faith, new love for one another and new hope, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.